ISLAMIC ARTS & ARCHITECTURE

History of the Nasrids of Granada

By Markus Hattstein on September 8, 2011 in History, Nasrid · 1 Comments

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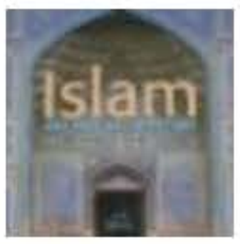
The last Islamic kingdom in Western Europe and the rise of the Nasrids

The last Islamic kingdom in Western Europe, the Nasrid kingdom of Granada, has always fascinated historians and, since the Romantic period, has inspired European interest in the Orient. Forced onto the defensive at an early stage, and always having to struggle for its continued existence, the kingdom not only successfully held its own for 250 years, but also became the last bastion of sophisticated Andalusian-Arab culture, despite infighting and various attacks from the outside world.

The Nasrid family, who until this time had been insignificant provincial princes, took advantage of the fall of the Almohads in Spain aher 1229, when a series of local rulers and governors again started to set up small, albeit very short-lived, kingdoms. One of these was Muhammad ibn Yusuf ibn Nasr from Arjona, in the province of Jaen, who, as head of the Banu l-Ahmar, could trace his ancestry directly to one of the Prophet Muhammads comrades-in- arms. On April 18, 1232, he proclaimed himself Muhammad I, Sultan of Arjona, thereby rapidly extending his rule to Jaen, Guadix, and Baza, and in May of 1237, he conquered Granada, making it the capital of his kingdom.

About the Author



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Through a tactically adept policy of alliances with the Christian kingdoms as well as the Merinids in Morocco, Muhammad I extended his kingdom, forcing some towns to submit to him and conquering others. Displaying astute judgment of the existing power relationships, he accepted King Fernando III of Castile as his sovereign and in 1248 even helped him, as his vassal, to conquer Seville. While still on the throne himself, Muhammad I named his sons as his successors, to ensure the continued existence of his kingdom in the bet of the Christian Reconquista. By the time he died in January of 1273, he had eliminated his enemies and rivals within his kingdom and brought the power of the rebellious nobility under his control.

Power and government were farther consolidated in Granada under Muhammad II (1273-1302), the eldest son of the kingdom's founder. Muhammad II first terminated the policy of alliances with the Chris- tuns, and then entered into a pact with the Merinids of Morocco, who also had base* in Andalusia and ruled jointly in vevcul cities in southern Spain. His original objevtive was to unite all Muslims in Spain and North Ainu in battle against the Reconquista.

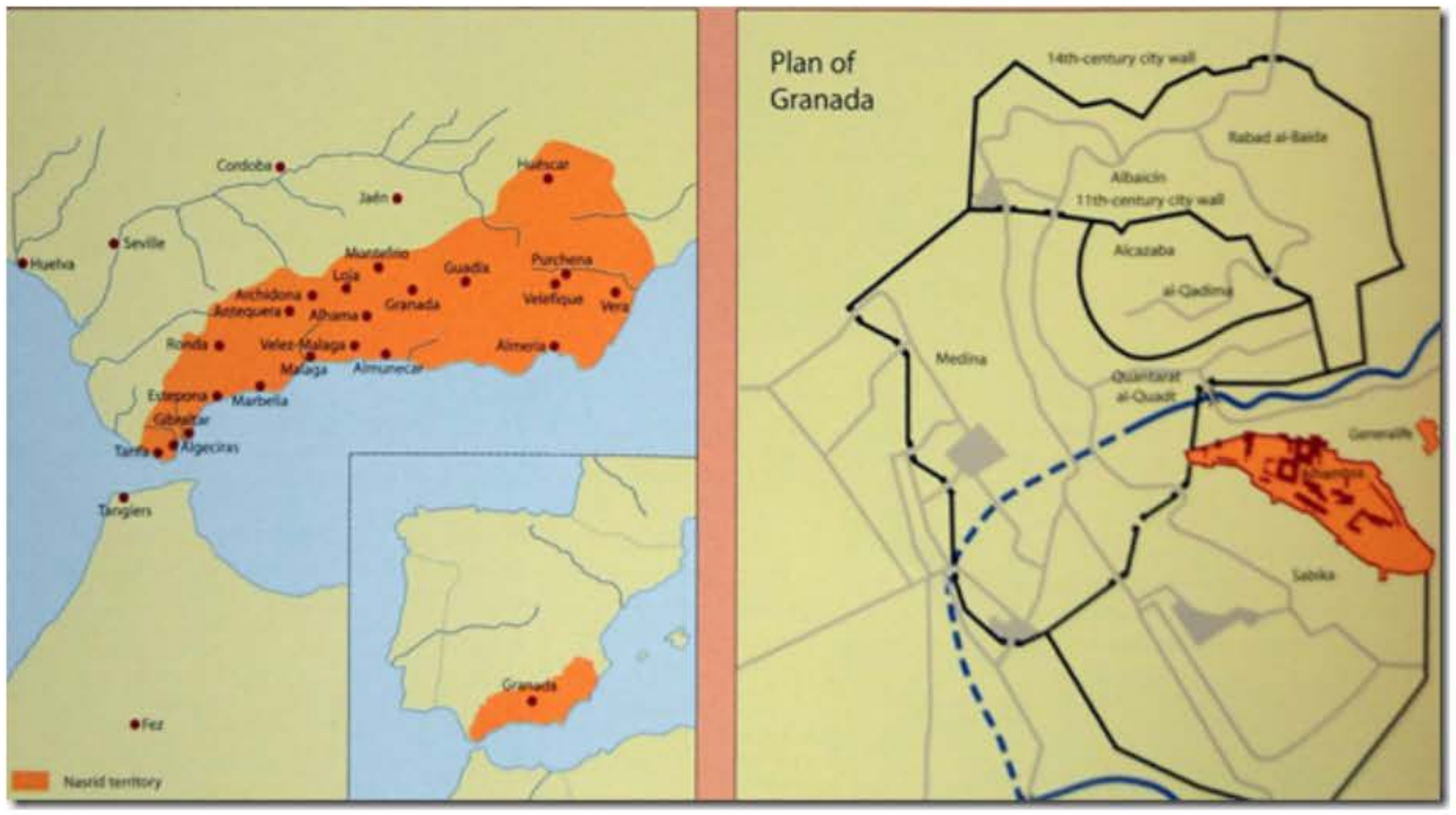
However, this alliance with the Merinids fell apart during the fight for Malaga, which, after a prolonged siege, reverted to the Nasrids in 1279, after an interim period under Merinid vassals. Muhammad II was thus faced with a major alliance between the Merinids and the Christian kings, hue was able to counteract it In skillfully exploiting the internal quarrels among his enemies. After 124H), he created an alliance with the Christian kingdoms against the Merinids. The Christian king. Alfonso XI, successfully drove the Merinids from the south toast and forced them to relinquish all their bases in Spain.

Muhammad II was as politically astute and far-sighted as hn father and entered into various alliances to strengthen the kingdom of Granada Me had also extended the region under his control to pans of Castile. Muhammad II was succeeded by his intellectual but politically inept son. Muhammad III 1302-1309). The father's achievements were all but lost when, in 1304, Muhammad III and his troops occupied the Moroccan port of Ceuta, used by the Merinids as a springboard to Spain, and which the king therefore wanted to conquer. The enterprise ended in disaster, because the kingdom of Granada was suddenly surrounded on three sides by an alliance between the Merinids, Aragon, and Castile. Muhammad III was thus deposed and replaced by his younger brother, Nasr (1309-1314), who tried to save the situation by making major concessions to his opponents, especially the Merinids.

His successor, Ismail I (1314—1325), made another alliance with the Merinids. In 1319, with the help of Moroccan Berber contingents, he won an important victory over Castile in the battle of the Vega, which temporarily halted the advance of the Christians. However, after Ismail's assassination, Granada was once again forced on the defensive and had to accept heavy land losses under the rule of the child sultan Muhammad IV (1325-1333).

The kingdom of Granada at its zenith

Under the rule of the sultans Yusuf I and Muhammad V, who are most famous as architects of the Alhambra, the kingdom of Granada was at its peak. The extremely diverse countryside between the coast on the one side and the high mountains of the Sierra Nevada on the other meant that the kingdom had to be cultivated in a very organized fashion. Andalusia was famed by its contemporaries for its agriculture. The fertile land around Granada, the Vega, was artificially irrigated in summer, so that it was possible to cultivate a wide variety of vegetables, grafted fruit trees, olives, vines, citrus fruits, and dates. Corn, wheat and barley were grown and processed as staple foods, while, on the coast, fishing and sea trade with northern Africa were particularly important.



The domain of the sultan, who also demanded a major part of the produce of the Vega for his own personal use, was very extensive, whereas private land ownership and leased land formed increasingly small parcels. Larger tracts of land were managed on the basis of a joint lease or a system of shared ownership. Increasingly, the many small villages and hamlets in the countryside developed in line with the example of the cities – with the mosque and marketplace forming the center. It would be wrong to speak of general prosperity, however, because the high tribute payments to Castile were a constant burden on the population. Nevertheless, the splendid buildings of this period bear witness to the life of luxury enjoyed by the ruling classes. The lower echelons must also have been able to earn a reasonable living, because the kingdom of Granada experienced no social unrest.

Yusuf I (1333-1354) concluded various peace treaties so that he could devote himself to cultural activities within his kingdom and to his passion for building. At the very start of his reign, he negotiated a peace treaty with Castile and Morocco, and from 1336 he maintained close diplomatic relations with Aragon. In 1340, however, Castile and Portugal formed an alliance and defeated him at Tarifa. In 1342, the fortress at Algeciras, on the southern tip of the kingdom, was besieged by the Castilians and was forced to capitulate two years later. Despite this, in the same year (1344), Yusuf concluded a ten-year peace treaty with Castile and used this period to carry out his major building plans. In 1348, he started the major works to extend the Alhambra, and opened the Madrasa of Granada, which became the kingdoms greatest mosque school.

Vase from the Alhambra. 14-15th century. Granada, Museo Nacional de Arte Hispanomusulman The production of valuable objets d'art enriched not only the court of the ruler, but also enlivened Granada's busy trade in merchandise with the Islamic kingdoms of the East and northern Africa, particularly with the Merinids in Morocco. This winged vase is based on classical amphorae and shows two exaggeratedly thin golden gazelles on a blue background, moving while facing each other, surrounded by foliage and geometric motifs. The Muslim blessing of "Happiness and Prosperity" is inscribed on the central band that goes right round the vase.

When Yusuf was assassinated by a bodyguard in October 1354, his son, Muhammad V (1354-1359 and 1362-1391), came to the throne. In 1359 the port of Malaga was lost to the Christian fleet, and Muhammad V was overthrown in a palace uprising, and exiled to Morocco. It was another three years before he regained the throne of Granada. He was able to ensure a longer period of peace after 1370 by means of a policy of close alliances with Morocco and Christian Spain, and he also developed good diplomatic relations with the Mamluks in Cairo, which also benefited trade.

Muhammad V developed his keen interest in building and carried out most of his extensive construction work mainly in the second period of his reign, creating the Alhambra complex in the form we know it today, with verses carved in the stone walls in praise of its ruler. The reign of Muhammad V saw Nasrid art and culture reach its peak. In terms of religion, Granada was a bastion of conservative-orthodox Malikite Islam. The kingdoms theology schools produced many outstanding orthodox jurists, and, with the works of the world traveler Ibn Battuta, who spent some time in Granada, and of Vizier Ibn al-Khatib, literature also reached a high point in Granada.

The sciences received a particular boost when the Madrasa was founded in Granada and it produced a great number of commentaries, historical works, and anthologies. Forced out by the Reconquista, important and traditional schools of medicine and astrology also settled in Granada. Alongside commentaries on Hippocrates and Galen, these schools also produced new compendia of surgery and pharmacology. Attempts were also made to investigate in greater depth the natural causes of the great plague, which struck Granada in several waves after 1348.

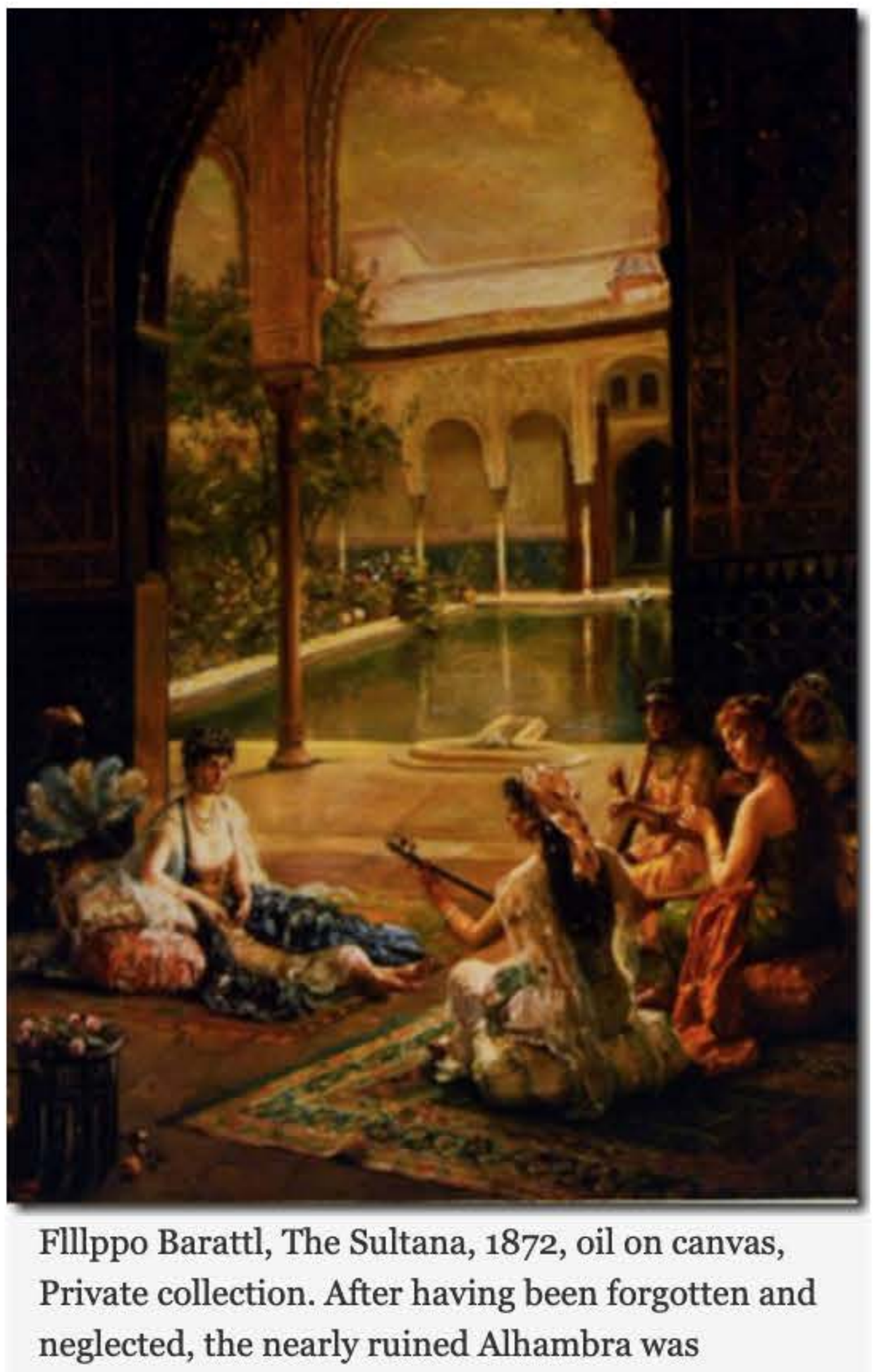
Ibn al-Khatib (1313—1375) was a prominent historian who entered the service of Yusuf I as secretary in 1340 and was quickly promoted. In 1359, he accompanied Muhammad V when he was exiled to Morocco, and on his return, held the highest office, that of vizier, between 1362 and 1371. He knew the major scholars of his time, such as Ibn Khaldun, and left a legacy of over 60 works.

Poetry was particularly encouraged from the time of Muhammad HI, who like his vizier Ibn al-Hakim al-Rundi, was a distinguished poet. Yusuf I surrounded himself constantly with poets, and under Muhammad V, established literary circles grew up in the court. As well as hymns of praise Co the ruler, particularly Muhammad V, there were also satirical poems and poems in the traditional Arabic style (tawriya). Some more significant poets, such as Ibn Zam- rak (1333—1393), whose poems also adorn the walls of the Alhambra, set the style for the Madrasa of Granada. Many members of the Nasrid dynasty, such as Sultan Yusuf III, were famous for their poems. There was an active cultural and intellectual exchange with Morocco and the Mamluks of Egypt. Many scholars and poets visited the various courts, thus reinforcing this cultural symbiosis.

1232	Muhammad ibn Yusuf ibn Nasr proclaims himself Sultan Muhammad I in Arjona
1237	Conquest of Granada; Granada becomes the capital of the Nasrid kingdom
1246	The Nasrids place themselves under the supreme power of Fernando III of Castile
1246	Muhammad I helps King Fernando III conquer Seville
1273–1302	Sultanate of Muhammad II
1274–1275	Alliance between the Nasrids and the Merinids; the Merinids conquer Tarifa and Algeciras
1278	The Banu Ashqilula in Malaga come under Merinid rule
1279	The Nasrids win back Malaga
1280–1281	Alliance of the Banu Ashqilula, the Castilians, and the Merinids against Granada
1288	The Banu Ashqilula lose Guadix to the Nasrids and retreat to North Africa
1295	Nasrid offensive against Castile
1304	The Nasrids take Ceuta
1309	A palace uprising overthrows Muhammad III (1302–1309), succeeded by his brother Nasr (1309–1314); the Merinids recapture Ceuta
1319	Under Ismail I (1314–1325), the Nasrids defeat the Castilians (Battle of the Vega around Granada)
1325–1333	Reign of Muhammad IV
1333–1391	Cultural golden age under Yusuf I (1333–1354) and Muhammad V (1354–1359 and 1362–1391)
1340	The Nasrids defeated by Castilian-Portuguese troops at Tarifa
1344	Algeciras falls to Castile; the Nasrids conclude ten-year peace treaty with Castile
1362	With the help of the Castilian king, Muhammad V succeeds in recapturing Granada
1369	Algeciras recaptured by the Nasrids
1392–1408	Reign of Muhammad VII
1408–417	Reign of Yusuf III
1421	Pope's call for Crusades against the Nasrids
1431	Battle "de la Higueruela" in the Vega around Grenada: Nasrids besiege troops of Juan II
1464–1482	Reign of Abu l-Hasan Ali
1483–485	(known as Mulai Hasan)
1469	Marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile paves the way for the unification of Christian Spain
1470	In Malaga, Muhammad al-Zaghal rises up against Abu l-Hasan Ali
1483	The Nasrids are defeated by Castile. Muhammad XII (1482, 1486–1492), known as Boabdil, taken prisoner; on his release, he rules as vassal of the Catholic king in Guadix
1485	Muhammad al-Zaghal seizes power for himself, as Muhammad XIII; the Castilians conquer Ronda; further conquests follow: Malaga (1487), Guadix, Almeria (1489)
1486	Muhammad XII returns to Granada
1492	Muhammad XII capitulates and hands Granada over to the Christian kings

Timeline of Nasrid Rule

Political decline and the end



Flllppo Barattl, The Sultana, 1872, oil on canvas, Private collection. After having been forgotten and neglected, the nearly ruined Alhambra was rediscovered in the Romantic era and became a focal point for European longings for the exotic and the supposed sensuality of the Orient. No work contributed more to this feeling than the travelogs and tales of the American author Washington Irving. In The Alhambra, written in 1832, he combined historical records with motifs from oriental and romantic legends and sentimentally transfigured the Granada of the Moors. Many historic paintings and book illustrations were based on his stories.

After the death of Muhammad V, Castilian armies again invaded the Nasrid kingdom in April 1394, but were decisively beaten by the bellicose Sultan Muhammad VII (1392-1408), the last politically powerful Nasrid ruler. Under Yusuf III (1408-1417), the constant pressure from Castile further increased, and after 1410, Granada faced a relatively strong alliance of the Christian princes.

After 1417, the kingdom sank into a lasting crisis in terms of domestic politics, when a succession of short-lived emirs fought against each other, drove each other out, and then returned to the throne time and again with the help of Christians and changing alliances. One of these emirs, Muhammad IX, ruled a total of four times between 1419 and 1447. The Christian kingdoms' help with alliances did not come cheap, and they constantly wrought further concessions from the weakened kingdom. The Muslim troops suffered a heavy defeat in 1431, after which the Christian kings began their systematic advance into the region of Granada. In June of the year 1431, Juan II of Castile even managed to advance briefly as far as Elvira at the foot of Granada's city walls. As early as 1421, the pope in Rome had called Christendom to launch Crusades against Granada. The end of Nasrid rule was only a matter of time.

In the 1440s, the anarchy in Muhammad IX's struggles for the throne came to a peak. This period also saw uprisings by the Andalusian nobility and the bloody end of the powerful Abencerrajes dynasty within the Alhambra's walls. In the 1450s, several equally powerful sultans of the now divided ruling dynasty were at this moment fighting for power, and the situation was becoming rapidly more chaotic. Granada owed its survival solely to the anarchy that also prevailed in Castile at this period. Only the penultimate Nasrid emir, Abu 1-Hasan Ali, known as Mulai Hasan (1464-1482 and 1483-1485), managed to bring some semblance of order back to the situation within Granada. In particular, he reorganized military affairs, thus for one final time establishing the borders of the kingdom, and he also suppressed the rebellion led by his brother, Muhammad al-Zaghal, who had settled in Malaga in 1470. Starting fresh negotiations with the Christian kingdoms, he set up permanent legations and recognized the risk posed by the unification of the two Christian kingdoms as a result of the marriage of the "Catholic Monarchs," Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, in 1469.

The end of the kingdom, or sultanate, of Granada became a favorite subject of 19th-century Romantic literature, particularly as a result of Washington Irving's stories, and it is difficult to separate historical facts from romantic embellishments. Authors have liked to attribute the end of Moorish Granada to Mulai Hasan's love for an aristocratic Christian woman.

In actual fact, there was a power struggle in the palace between the Sultana Fatima and the Christian favorite, Turaiya. Moreover, with regard to the succession to the throne, Mulai Hasan intended to overlook his elder sons in favor ofTuraiya's children. Taking advantage of Mulai Hasans campaign at l oja in July 1482, his eldest son, Muhammad XII, whom the Spaniards called Boabdil (a corruption of his real name, Abu Abdallah) or El Rey Chico ("The Little King"), seized the throne with the help of the Christians and some noble Arab families. This resulted in a civil war between father and son, which sapped the kingdom of its last vestiges of strength. At the battle of Lucena, in April 1483, the Christians took the inexperienced Boabdil prisoner, and Mulai Hasan returned to the throne. When he died two years later, his brother, al-Zaghal, seized power as Muhammad XIII in Almeria.

Nasrid sword, 15th century, Cassel, Staatliche Kunstsammlung. This sword, made for the Nasrid court, with its richly ornamented blade showing the heads of two fabulous creatures, must have been used for ceremonial purposes rather than for fighting. From the very beginning, the rulers of Granada recognized the military supremacy of Castile on the Iberian Peninsula and assumed the status of vassals to the Christian kingdom. The internal strife of the 15th century led to a gradual loss of territory for Granada. Even though the bellicose Sultan Mulai Hasan, and his courageous brother Muhammad al-Zaghal, co-ruler of Malaga, did manage to achieve further military successes against the Christians, the last sultan Boabdil was taken prisoner by the Christians in 1483. He regained his freedom only by making major concessions that led, just a few years later – in January 1492 to Granada being taken by the Catholic Monarchs.

This created an opportunity for the extremely cunning King Ferdinand of Aragon, who was holding Boabdil prisoner, and who, since 1484, had been steadily advancing on the land surrounding Granada. Boabdil was released in return for concessions, under which he became a vassal of the Catholic Monarchs and large sums of money were paid. In March of the year i486 he was once again in Granada, from where he conducted the fight against his uncle. The Catholic Monarchs had in the meantime been advancing towards Granada: Ronda fell into Christian hands in 1485, Malaga in 1487, and Guadix in 1489. In December of 1489, the courageous, bellicose al-Zaghal was forced to hand over Almeria in return for free passage. Many Andalusian Muslims, especially members of the nobility, were exiled to Morocco and Egypt.

In 1491, the siege closed around the city of Granada, and Boabdil capitulated in return for free passage. On January 2, 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella entered Granada without a struggle at the head of their army. A cultural epoch and an era had come to an end. The tragic figure of the last king of Granada, who, after 1527, fell in battle in the service of the Sultan of Morocco, has particularly attracted the attention of historians and writers, especially those of the 19th century. Whereas all sorts of cruelties and excesses used to be attributed to him, he is now viewed more as an inept ruler whose actions were unfortunate and who could no longer defend himself against his enemies.

The Catholic Monarchs, incidentally, revoked the agreements they had generously sworn for the right of the Muslims and Jews remaining in Granada to practice their religions and unleashed a wave of compulsory baptisms. But that really belongs to the history of Christian Spain.